

2000

The truth games of public relations politics

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Recommended Citation

Motion, Judy M. and Leitch, Shirley, "The truth games of public relations politics" (2000). *Faculty of Business - Papers (Archive)*. 465.

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Abstract

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Keywords

games, public, truth, politics, relations

Disciplines

Business

Publication Details

Motion, J. & Leitch, S. (2000). The truth games of public relations politics. *Australian Journal of Communications*, 27 (2), 65-80.

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ABSTRACT

This article employs thematic analysis to examine the relationships between public relations practitioners, their women politician clients, and the media they seek to influence in order to create and popularise particular truths. The six key themes considered within this article are truth, news values, coterie communication, gatekeepers, media training, and informalization. The article draws upon interviews conducted with women elected to New Zealand's national Parliament in 1994 and women who held mayoral office in 1996. It also draws upon interviews with the public relations practitioners who undertook media relations work for these women politicians.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the way in which the concept of truth is understood and deployed by the public relations practitioners who manage the media profiles of women politicians. The article focuses on the relationships between the increasing number of women politicians, their public relations advisers and the news media, and the way in which these relationships result in the production of particular kinds of truths within media discourse. The paper begins by examining how differing interpretations of the concept of truth (Foucault, 1996a) affect the conduct of public relations politics (Ward, 1995). The news values that are used to regulate entry to and treatment of various truths within media discourse are then discussed. The relationships between public relations practitioners, their clients and media personnel, and the impact that these relationships have on the construction of truth by the media, are then analysed in terms of coterie communication (Tiff-

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en, 1989). The role of media gatekeepers and the media coaching methods used by public relations practitioners to improve the performance of their clients, and combat the gatekeepers, are examined. Finally, the impact of the strategy of 'informalization' on the media profiles of women politicians is assessed. The purpose of this article is not to offer a normative guide for women politicians. Rather, the purpose is to explore how truths are produced and represented in the media discourse of public relations politics.

METHOD

As Ross and Sreberny-Mohammadi (1997) assert, 'Most research in the field of political communication has tended to concentrate on content analysis of media products' (p. 102). Some studies, such as Ross and Sreberny-Mohammadi's own work, have included interviews with politicians. Others, such as Tiffen (1989), have included interviews with both politicians and journalists. This article differs in that it focuses on women politicians and their public relations advisers. For this study, standardized open-ended interviews were conducted with New Zealand women politicians, in central and local government, and with the public relations practitioners who worked with these politicians. The sample of twenty women politicians included all but one of those elected to Parliament in 1994. The sample of ten women mayors included all but two of those who were serving in 1996. Those Members of Parliament (MPs) and mayors not included in the study declined to be interviewed due to time pressures.

Women politicians were selected as the subjects for this article because during the 1993 to 1996 Parliamentary term under study a significant number of women were elected to office for the first time. Moreover, for the first time in New Zealand's history, women became leaders of two major political parties. Overall, the number of women politicians in central government tripled. The reason for this substantial increase was that New Zealand had changed its electoral system from first-past-the post to proportional representation. Under proportional representation, political parties had to field lists of candidates as well as candidates for geographically-based electorates. The party lists, which were the subject of much public scrutiny, offered a much greater diversity of candidates in terms of both gender and ethnicity than had been the case under first-past-the-post.

When the women politicians were interviewed, many of them claimed not to use public relations consultants, or explained that public relations practitioners often did not want to be associated with a partic-

ular political party or politician. As a result, few names of practitioners were initially provided by the women politicians. In order to increase the sample size, a letter was sent to the women politicians requesting that they anonymously name public relations practitioners who had worked with women politicians. The names of a total of nine practitioners were eventually provided. The interviews were conducted over a two year period between 1994 and 1996. They lasted for between one and three hours and were taped and transcribed. The practitioners were all interviewed on the understanding that their identities would not be revealed. Thus the practitioners are referred to simply as 'practitioner A' or 'practitioner B' in this paper. The same identifier is used for the same practitioner throughout the paper so that it is possible to connect the narratives together.

The transcribed interviews were analysed thematically to draw out the major themes. The transcript data was then organised according to the six major themes that emerged: truth, news values, coterie communication, gatekeepers, media training, and informalisation. These themes were identified according to the criteria of frequency, intensity, and salience (Foss, 1989). A theme satisfied the criterion of frequency when it recurred in more than a third of the transcripts. A theme satisfied the criterion of intensity when it was represented in an emotionally forceful way by the interviewee. A theme satisfied the criterion of salience when the interviewees emphasised its importance. The six themes discussed in this article satisfied all three criteria.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

The work of Grunig and Hunt (1984) has provided a starting point for much research in the area of public relations. In particular, Grunig and Hunt's four models of press agency, public information, and two-way asymmetrical offered the first systematic framework for thinking about public relations practice. In this study, Grunig and Hunt's press agency and public information models have been used to characterise some of the ways in which both public relations practitioners and their clients have approached media relations.

The media relations area is fortunate in having the rich literature of media studies and media theory to draw upon. However, much of the work in media relations has tended to be normative and prescriptive (see for example: Tymson & Sherman, 1996; Oberman, 1995; Peart, 1996). This article breaks with that tendency in drawing upon both a range of media scholars (see for example, Scammell, 1995; Tiffen, 1989; Tuchman, 1978; Ward, 1995; Wouter, 1986) and upon the work of the

post structuralist theorist Michel Foucault. The media scholarship that informs this study focuses on the relationship between journalists and their sources and on the impact that this relationship has on news content. The Foucauldian scholarship contributes a deep understanding of the concept of 'truth' that may be applied to public relations work.

TRUTH GAMES

According to the Code of Professional Standards for Practice of Public Relations of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), 'A member shall adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth, avoiding extravagant claims or unfair comparisons and giving credit for ideas and words borrowed from others' (Seitel, 1998, p. 508). It is interesting that the PRSA chose to speak of the 'highest standards' of truth, which implies that there are multiple standards of truth rather than a single standard. Michel Foucault (1996b) also believed in multiple versions of truth, declaring: 'I believe too much in the truth not to assume that there are different truths and different ways of saying it' (p. 453). Foucault perceived multiple truths at work in society. He proposed that we think of these multiple truths as produced, regulated, distributed, circulated, and operated within systems of power. Truth for Foucault is then 'linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A regime of truth' (Foucault, 1980, p. 133). It is the link between power and truth that leads to the creation of regimes of truth. A regime of truth may be read as a controlling mechanism within history that ensures that only certain truths are recognised and able to freely circulate.

Foucault (1987) used the metaphor of the game to examine the controlling mechanism of truth at work within society. For Foucault (1996c) the word 'game' referred to 'a set of procedures that lead to a certain result, which, on the basis of its principles and rules of procedure, may be considered valid or invalid, winning or losing' (p. 445). In an interview shortly before his death, Foucault (1996c) expanded on the idea of a game of truth, referring to it as 'a set of rules by which truth is produced' (p. 445). Thus truth is a possibility (what may be said) as well as an imperative (what must be said) and it operates within a set of tightly defined rules.

The public relations practitioners who were interviewed for this study identified professional ethics, honesty, and truth as significant issues when working with politicians. Some public relations practitioners asserted that politicians must be scrupulously honest in their dealings

with the media. For example, a Wellington-based public relations practitioner lectured on the topic of ethics and public relations on behalf of the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ). She held that 'everything comes back to honesty and being true to yourself', explaining that 'basically my message is never tell a lie and never ever compromise anybody with either breaking a confidence or by a gratuity'. For practitioner A, there was no room for compromise and no middle ground between truth and lies. She advocated complete adherence to rule two of the Code of Professional Conduct for members of the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ): 'A member shall adhere to the highest standards of honesty, accuracy, integrity and decency'. It is interesting to note the significant difference between the PRSA code and the PRINZ code, in that the latter does not use the word 'truth'. Perhaps PRINZ considered the concept of truth to be too slippery and therefore moved the emphasis from the nature of the message to the intention of the practitioner.

Practitioner B fully subscribed to the PRINZ imperative for honesty with the media. Weber stated that:

I teach people how to manage issues, how to positively promote the good things that they do. How, when they are managing a crisis that I believe they have to front up and be honest about it. I would never teach people to deliberately obfuscate things because in the end I think that the media have a limited tolerance with that high level obfuscation.

Thus for practitioner B, the ethic of honesty was a strategic choice rather than a moral imperative. She encouraged politicians to be honest with the media because this strategy offered the lowest level of risk.

In contrast, the ethic that other practitioners employed could be characterised as 'tell the truth, but not the whole truth'. Practitioner C's advice to politicians was:

Don't ever lie, you must never lie. You have to treat the people that you deal with with respect, and that includes the media. You won't omit things but you don't have an obligation to tell them everything, particularly if it's negative about you.

Practitioner C's comments may be interpreted as advocating the right to retain some personal privacy. Alternatively, her comments may be seen as advocating the right to withhold information that might negatively affect the way in which key publics would view a particular situation. The Foucauldian notion of multiple truths would clearly be useful for such practitioners in their dealings with the media. They advo-

cate a form of truth that is based on the spin doctor's maxim of highlighting the positive rather than the PRSA maxim of adhering to the highest standard of truth.

Practitioner D, a former high profile member of a major political party, advised clients that it was not always possible to tell the whole truth:

You don't ever think because you're going into politics you're going to have to compromise. There will be occasions when you won't be able to say what's happening, you won't be able to answer questions directly, but that's different from lying. Lying is unacceptable but not answering directly is acceptable.

Practitioner D considered that 'there's no virtue in being stupidly open all the time, but that doesn't mean that you tell an untruth'. Lying was an anathema, but inept or unplanned openness was unnecessary. Truth, openness, or honesty were to be managed or controlled. She suggested that clients use delaying tactics when dealing with difficult media enquiries by stating, 'at a point at which I am in a position to comment, I will call you'. However, she cautioned politicians to avoid 'no comment' statements that might imply that something was being concealed from journalists. Thus, in practitioner D's version of the game of truth, it was more important for politicians to appear honest than to be honest.

It is clear that the public relations practitioners interviewed for this study had a variety of understandings of the concepts of truth and honesty. For some, truth was an imperative while for others it was a strategic choice. One strategic choice was to only tell as much truth as was necessary. Unnecessary truth telling was an indication of naivety and of a lack of understanding of positioning tactics within a media discourse. Whichever position the practitioners urged their clients to adopt, the goal was the same: maximum positive media coverage.

NEWS VALUES

The media play a central role in the success or failure of politicians. In order to survive in public life, politicians must communicate the particular truths they wish known about themselves in order to build the kind of media profile that will enable them to gain office and remain in office. A key role for the public relations practitioners who work with politicians, then, is ensuring that their clients have a clear understanding of the rules that govern entry to and participation in the media discourse. Within media scholarship, these rules are referred to as 'news values' (see for example: Gans, 1979; Tiffen, 1989; Ward, 1995). These

news values serve as guidelines for media gatekeepers. They are used to decide what is newsworthy and what is not, as well as to determine how important a particular story is and thus how prominently it will be featured (Tuchman, 1978). This process is a game of truth in which participants require a high level of media expertise.

One reason for the high level of media expertise possessed by many public relations practitioners lies in their status as ex-journalists. Within this study, for example, six of the nine public relations practitioners interviewed had initially worked as journalists. Thus, as Ward (1995) asserts, public relations practitioners 'are able to utilise their knowledge of deadlines, formats and news frames or 'angles', and of newswork practices generally' (p. 164) in order to create media profiles for their clients

More than thirty years ago, Galtung and Ruge (1965) identified twelve news values, including: frequency, threshold, unambiguity, meaningfulness, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity, composition, elite nations, elite persons, personalization, and negativity. Many elements from this list of news values could be applied to the New Zealand news media in the 1990s. For example, practitioner A understood the need to position her clients as elite sources by demonstrating their expertise on particular issues. She stated:

It's having a message; it's always having a message. There's no point in standing up in front of a journalist and sort of saying 'Oh I'm the greatest' unless you've got something really positive to say. So that means really developing quite an expertise and an area.

Just what it took to become an elite source, however, varied according to the nature of the news organisation applying that news value. The news values of local media, for example, differed substantially from those of national media, just as those of television differed from those of the print media.

One MP, Janet Mackey, clearly understood that, in her electorate, almost everything she did was newsworthy by virtue of her status as an MP. Mackey concentrated on building relationships with her local newspaper, the *Gisborne Herald*, rather than on attempting to gain national coverage through television or the larger metropolitan newspapers. 'It's very much more a symbiotic relationship. They need me or otherwise they have to talk about Watties prize pea crop every night and they need my stories'. What MP Mackey had discerned and was capitalising on was the media's 'need for regular supply' (Tiffen, 1989). MP Mackey ensured that the *Gisborne Herald* had a good supply of stories while she was in

Wellington and that the newspaper got the first option on any story concerning her. Her strategy of privileging local media meant that she received less coverage in nationally read newspapers such as *The Dominion* and *The New Zealand Herald*. However, MP Mackey did not perceive this to be a problem because the people who read *The Dominion* and *The New Zealand Herald* did not vote for her. MP Mackey provided local media with the first scoop and prioritised them in return for status as an elite source. She explained:

I listened to people's comments about my predecessor during the campaign. Never saw him except in the campaign. He never did anything. They may not have seen him but he was around and their perception may have been that he did nothing but he actually didn't tell them what he did. So I make sure people know where I am, that they see me and I make sure that they know what I do.

The relationship that MP Mackey cultivated with the media acknowledged her need for a high profile in her electorate and implied that she was already working towards being re-elected. Thus, she was engaged in what Scammell (1995) referred to as 'the permanent campaign'. Every encounter that MP Mackey had with the media was strategised in terms of her re-election to Parliament.

MP Judith Tizard believed that entering media discourse was difficult because the primary news value was negativity. As Leitch (1990) explained, 'The best news is, as some New Zealanders keep complaining, bad news' (pp. 23-24). In MP Tizard's view, what the media seek

is flux, they want crisis, they want drama, they want dispute. They don't want to know that the selection process is going sensibly and constitutionally and there are healthy tensions with people with competing interests.

MP Tizard perceived the news values that govern media discourse to be spectacle, crises, conflict, in short: negativity. The news value of negativity identified by MP Tizard would privilege politicians with dramatic, controversial, or adversarial styles. Her interpretation of the news values was echoed by MP Sandra Lee, who perceived that the tactics of some men politicians would better suit news values because

it is much easier to be [MP] John Banks and just be a bit of a 'bloke' and be outrageous than to be a woman politician who thoroughly researches an issue and might get out a press release which disappears into oblivion.

The apparent success of what could be characterised as the press agency model of public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) indicates that understanding the news values rather than hard work may be the key to public relations politics.

COTERIE COMMUNICATION

The relationships between politicians, media, and public relations practitioners create what Tiffen (1989) referred to as 'coterie communication'. Tiffen likened coterie communication to 'a hall of mirrors', in which the coterie 'are audience one minute, actors the next; targets of some messages, sources of others' (p. 93). Coterie communication assisted politicians to gain entry to media discourse and participate in media debates. Practitioner E explained that the Leader of the Opposition, Helen Clark, had employed her because of her excellent relationships with news media in Clark's Auckland electorate. Practitioner E used her friendships with journalists to gain media coverage for her clients.

Practitioner F recommended that politicians employed a press secretary with the knowledge and understanding of the media to facilitate participation in media discourse. She considered that an outstanding public relations practitioner actually created the media persona of the politician. Practitioner F cited the example of the former Minister of Finance, MP Ruth Richardson, who had undergone a dramatic transformation upon her promotion to that important cabinet portfolio. She claimed: 'Richardson of course had Symmans who was very, very shrewd, a very good press secretary. Outstanding. She created Ruth'. Thus practitioner F had identified practitioners who engaged in what Tiffen (1989) has referred to as 'image engineering', in the creation of the politician as a public figure. Practitioners not only provide 'a conduit to the public' for the politician's media image but also actively create the image. This image, presented to and by the media, normally constitutes the primary source of 'truths' about the politician for the public.

Establishing the right kind of truths within media discourse is not, of course, simply a matter of image engineering by public relations practitioners. A variety of newswriters, including journalists, sub-editors, and editors are also actively involved in the construction of the politician's media persona. According to MP Annette King:

The media really make and break you as a politician and that's why there is this sort of love hate relationship between politicians and the media. They can portray you in such a way that the public think you are doing a

great job or a terrible job. They can make fun of you so that people think you are weak or hopeless or they can say that you have got these strengths that are shining through and you have got leadership qualities.

The difficulty, however, with a mediatised representation is that 'representation is always a selective recontextualization' (Fairclough, 1995, p. 188). As a consequence, mediatised identities are not, and cannot be, fully controlled by either politicians or their public relations practitioners.

The relationship between the media and politicians has been described as 'mutual discontent and mutual dependence' (Tiffen, 1989, p. 74). Fairclough (1995) agreed that, 'much critical work on mediatized politics has stressed complicity between the media and politicians, but it is also important to be alert to tensions, contradictions and struggles in the relationship' (p. 183).

MP Judith Tizard echoed this belief in the power struggle implicit in the relationship between politicians and MPs when she stated, 'they need us and we need them; but what we need of them is not what they perceive as their job, so there is a natural tension between what we want to get over and what journalists want to put over'.

MP Tizard maintained good relationships with journalists whom she would ring if there was something that she urgently wanted to get into the newspaper or onto television. She explained, 'I have good connections who know that I don't play publicity games very often'. However, capitalising on friendships, or coterie communication, may also be perceived as a publicity game.

The public truths that are circulated through the media about politicians may be considered the result of strategic relationships and manoeuvres between public relations practitioners, media personnel, and politicians. Fairclough (1995) talked of the relationship between politicians and the media as a 'relationship of complicity and mutual dependence which is constantly unsettled by its contradictions, for the agendas of politics, and the media are not in the end the same' (p. 200). These competing agendas, set in a context of mutual dependence, are at the core of the game of public relations politics in which the creation of particular truths is the objective for both journalists and public relations practitioners. The influence that public relations practitioners have on media content is often the subject of criticism (see, for example, Hager & Burton, 1999; Stauber & Rampton, 1995). However, the agen-

das of journalists and their news editors are even more likely to put a particular spin on a story (see for example: Tiffen, 1989; Tuchman, 1978).

MEDIA GATEKEEPERS

The direct relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists is apparent. However, it is not the journalist but the news editor and other gatekeepers who decide what will be published or broadcast and how a story will be framed. The concept of the gatekeeper casts media editors and decision makers as agents who 'select, process and organize information to be made available to an audience' (Gallagher, 1982, p. 153). Practitioner F explained that the key decision makers within the media are unknown to both media audiences and politicians. 'They wouldn't know who you were talking about. They only know the journalists that ring up to do the interviews'. Practitioner G agreed that establishing relationships with media gatekeepers was a crucial aspect of politics. She recommended that politicians cultivate media personnel and get to know the media gatekeepers.

Practitioner G used personal relationships to facilitate the process of getting stories adopted or dropped, the positioning of a story within a media program or newspaper, and the selection of a desired angle. This approach would fit Sumpter and Tankard's (1994) model of spin doctoring which 'puts greater stress on personal contacts' (p. 26) than does traditional public relations practice. The women politicians interviewed acknowledged the importance of relationships with media gatekeepers. For example, the Leader of the Opposition, Helen Clark, explained that she had been unhappy with the coverage she had received from journalists and decided to adopt another strategy:

I invest a reasonable amount of time into visiting editors and over the course of the last year I think that's begun to pay off because they have come to see me one to one, which is a great strength of mine, I think. A lot of editorials have been fine and, in time, one hopes that that changes the tone of papers towards you.

Thus Clark had observed that influencing media gatekeepers had a trickle-down effect on her media coverage.

When the women politicians experienced difficulties in gaining media coverage, some of them turned to controlled media. For example, Mayor Margaret Evans described a difficult relationship with the major local newspaper that had produced some negative news stories

that focused on the mayor's private life. In order to overcome the problem, Mayor Evans developed new and alternative media avenues in which she positioned herself as the gatekeeper. She explained:

Since I have been mayor we have moved into radio, we are working with Coast to Coast [TV], we produce our own newspaper, we are, I think, a lot better in terms of various approaches that we have. So you work smarter in the face of that sort of opposition.

The use of a variety of media outlets, including self-published outlets, gave Mayor Evans more control over her media profile. Thus, women politicians and their public relations advisers employed a wide variety of tactics to deal with media gatekeepers. While some actively courted the media gatekeepers, others chose to counter the influence of gatekeepers by the use of alternative and controlled media. Controlled media, especially when backed by the authority of a local or national government, may be an effective way to ensure that particular truths are circulated.

MEDIA TRAINING

The complexities of the news media make it a difficult institution for the inexperienced politician to deal with. For this reason, media training is commonly provided by political parties for their candidates. Individual politicians also seek out training to critique and improve their media skills. Some of the women public relations practitioners interviewed for this study considered that media training for women politicians was best conducted by other women. For example, public relations practitioner G stated that:

They must be media trained, preferably by sympathetic women like me. You know there is a whole group of us who have been involved in media before the camera, behind the camera, involved in training ... to empower women to make powerful presentations.

Practitioner G was alluding to a feminist agenda to train women politicians so that they could get more access to media coverage, with the ultimate goal being to increase the political power of women. She implied that women public relations practitioners had a personal agenda as well as a professional one when they worked with women politicians. It is interesting to note here that all but one of the practitioners interviewed for this study were women.

The public relations practitioners and women politicians interviewed were not, however, unanimous in their support for media training. A criticism offered of media training was that media performances were

'bland'. Public relations practitioner F considered that politicians were all taught the same techniques which had 'de-personalised them and removed their individuality.... At all costs you should preserve that personality and encourage it to come out'. According to this practitioner, the challenge is to train politicians in a way that enables them to appear untrained, to retain individual characteristics and yet appear to be media professionals. Thus, the aim is to appear as authentic yet expert players within media discourse. Thus media training is a necessary part of participation in media truth games.

MP Janet Mackey was, however, highly resistant to the notion of media truth games. She considered the techniques taught in the media training sessions that she had attended to be offensive and inappropriate. MP Mackey preferred to think of her relationship with the media in terms of what Grunig and Hunt (1984) referred to as the public information model, in which she simply provided information to the media in order to inform her electorate. The views that politicians hold about the media, including the ethics of different approaches to working with the media and creating truths, are, then, central factors for public relations practitioners to consider when designing media training programs.

INFORMALISATION

The primary media strategy for the creation of truths to emerge from this study was the process of 'informalization' (Wouter, 1986). Informalisation was defined by Featherstone (1991) as the removal of rigid cultural expectations that favour formality. For women politicians, informalisation requires adherence to popular and everyday values, the development of a 'common touch'. Fairclough (1995) warns that politicians who employ such practices may face the dilemma that if they claim to be ordinary, they may find themselves evaluated as ordinary people and found wanting, and unable to resort to traditional resources of political mystique and charisma to protect themselves. He suggests that the formality and status of high office offer a form of safety and protection from critical analysis that informalisation does not offer. Moreover, informalisation strategies may be perceived as press agency (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) and, thus, encourage scepticism and cynicism on the part of media audiences.

Despite the dangers inherent in informalisation, it was a popular strategy for the politicians and public relations practitioners interviewed for this study. For example, successive public relations practitioners

working with the Leader of the Opposition, Helen Clark, have adopted informalization strategies. Practitioner B, a former adviser to Clark, considered that:

people basically believe that Helen is competent, that she can do the job. What they're not sure about, in terms of public image, is whether they like her, whether they warm to her, whether she's one of them. And so in terms of media, you're having to think about how are we going to warm up the image?

The challenge that Practitioner B perceived was to create a likeable, informal public personality for Helen Clark. A tactic that she recommended was the development of a 'range of appearances' that would help Clark to appeal to a larger section of voters.

Practitioner E, who replaced Practitioner B as Clark's media adviser, described the technique she employed to informalise, and thus humanise, potential women politicians:

I really believe that the ordinary man or woman on the street wants to know who that person is, do they wear fluffy slippers, do they drink milk shakes, do they go to the supermarket on a Sunday? So I would attempt to persuade her to say yes to the softer media opportunities.

Practitioner E explained that she preferred an informalised media campaign because it was not political: 'in other words I look for opportunities in the women's magazines and in the major newspapers and on television'. This approach gave women politicians the opportunity to develop a range of appearances and, therefore, to reach a broader audience. Practitioner E explained her approach:

if they play sport I would target sports programmes on television; if they had a health problem I would target television health shows. If they are a brilliant singer and nobody knows it, then I'd target a music show. If they're a cuisine cook, I'd target a cooking show on television or a magazine.

The use of soft news formats and outlets fitted well with an informalisation strategy. This strategy enabled Practitioner E to package and promote her clients in a variety of ways to meet the needs of different types of media.

Turow (1983) suggested that public relations agencies have greater success in shaping 'soft' news than they do in shaping 'hard' news. Turow held that journalists regarded hard news as more important and were resistant to the attempts by public relations practitioners to shape or spin the stories. A central aspect of the media truth game for hard

news is that it is constructed by independent and objective journalists free of the influence of those with vested interests such as public relations practitioners (Leitch, 1990; Tiffen, 1989; Tuchman, 1978). Thus the practitioners interviewed had found a way to avoid this aspect of the media truth game by creating a niche in soft news for their clients. Moreover they gained access to media outlets not traditionally associated with political news, such as women's magazines, and, potentially, to audiences who may not have attended to political news.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored the truth games of media relations within public relations politics in a New Zealand context. The whole notion of public relations politics is generally framed in a negative way as somehow encapsulating the erosion of the democratic process (Ward, 1995). In the mediated world of late twentieth century life, however, the use of public relations practitioners and other communication experts has become a prerequisite for any political campaign. Politicians who lack 'media savvy' and who operate without public relations guidance are amateurs in a media world populated by highly trained professionals. Not only are they disadvantaged in relation to other politicians, they are also disadvantaged in relation to the media themselves. Journalists and their editors are participants rather than spectators in the truth games associated with public relations politics. Public relations practitioners certainly attempt to 'spin' stories in order to establish particular truths about their clients but they also act to protect their clients in the face of a media hungry for negative news.

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